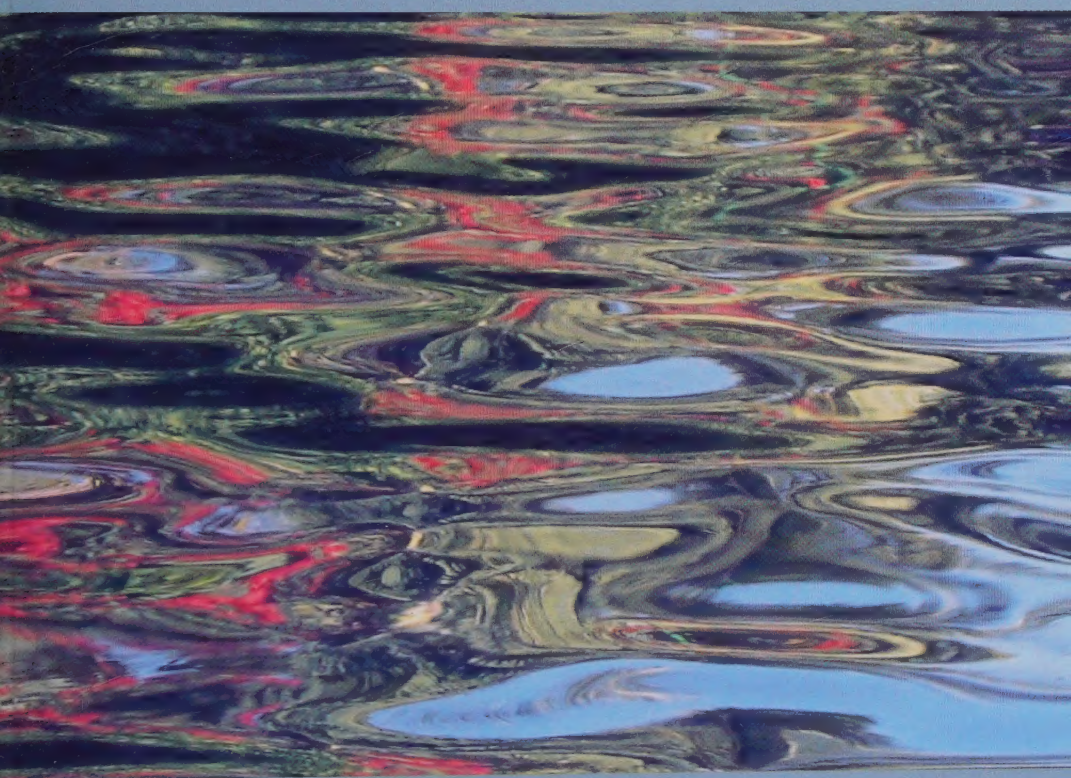
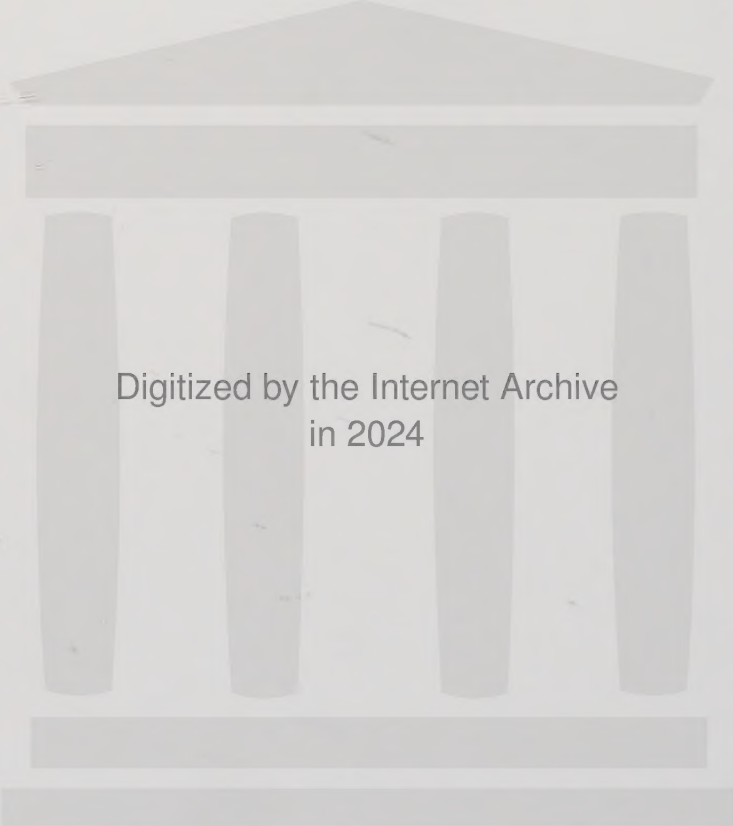


MAYA



GLIMPSES OF THE
MAHABHARATA

CHRISTA PANDEY



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MAYA

Glimpses of the Mahabharat

Poems by

Christa Pandey

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INTRODUCTION

The massive epic of India, the Mahabharat, consists of about 100,000 verses in Sanskrit. It is the great (maha) story of Bharat (India) with many twists and turns and, like a tree with many roots and branches, it has many side stories. Translations often tighten the narrative into main stories and a few important sidelines. The small volume of poems presented here is just a glimpse of the essential characters and issues. It is like a testing of the strings when tuning a sitar, before a maestro delves into a concert.

My interest in the Mahabharat was initially awakened while watching the nine-hour film production by Peter Brooks in the late 1980s. But to my Indian husband the international cast did not reflect this essentially Indian story. In 2010 we acquired a set of Indian made-for-TV volumes (16 volumes, 96 episodes) with English subtitles of the Mahabharata. The cast is lavishly attired and the sets elaborate, but it puts a distance between the ancient story and the modern viewer. Yet it is an eminently modern story as well. My understanding of the characters and the story is greatly influenced by watching the Indian set augmented by reading an English translation (short version).

Many non-Indian readers are familiar with the Bhagavad Gita. Its eighteen chapters are part of the Mahabharat. Volumes of translations and interpretations have been written about the Bhagavad Gita. In a separate companion volume, entitled 'Hummingbird Wings,' I have tried to capture some of the ideas in poetic form.

PRONUNCIATION GUIDE AND GLOSSARY (chronological, rather than alphabetical)

As English letters are pronounced with an initial or end-e, so Devanagari (Hindi, Sanskrit) letters are pronounced and generally written with an end-a. In English these -a sounds can become confusing, as they don't always have to be pronounced just as we don't pronounce the -e sounds in English within words. Also, some letters have an -h attached, which would be pronounced with an aspiration. I have occasionally omitted the -h in the text for easier reading. The glossary shows the transliterated words correctly.

In poetry, the pronunciation of a word will impact the rhythm of a line. Many of the Indian names look unnecessarily complicated and prevent the non-Indian reader from reading the poems smoothly. For this reason I have taken liberties with the spelling within the text to make the pronunciation easier. The glossary gives the traditional transliterated spelling of the names with those not necessarily pronounced in parentheses.

Arjun(a), Bhim(a), Nakul(a), Sahadev(a), Vidur(a) – many of these names can be pronounced by omitting the end-a. Both forms have been used, depending on the rhythm needed.

Mahabharat(a) – The grand epic of India, relating the rise and fall of the Bharatas. It is usually pronounced without the end -a. Its many twists and turns show that even in ancient times pride, greed, power struggles were alive and well.

Vyasa – Sage and philosopher to the gods, who created this epic.

Ganpati (or Ganesha) – The elephant-headed god, who was drafted by Vyasa as a scribe for this epic.

Hastinapur(a) – The town and kingdom of the Kaur(a)vas and Pandavas.

Indraprasht(a) – The town of the Pandavas after the division of the kingdom.

Ganga – The river Ganges is called Ganga in Indian languages.

Family Tree:

Santanu had **Devavrat(a)** (later named **Bhishma**) with **Ganga**, the Goddess of the River Ganges.

Santanu had another son with **Satyavati**. This son, married to three sisters, died before he had an heir. Satyavati asked her ascetic son from a previous relationship (sometimes thought of as Vyasa himself) to father children with these widowed queens.

One sister, **Amba**, ran away before she could be married. Through many austerities she received a promise that in a future life she would be instrumental in killing Bhishma. She became **Shikandin** in another life.

One sister, Ambika, bore the blind son **Dhritharashtra**.

One sister, Ambalika, bore the cursed son **Pandu**.

A maid of one of the queens bore another son, **Vidur(a)**.

Dhritharashtra married **Gandhari**. She bore him one hundred sons. Since his name is the most complicated, I refer to him in the text as **the blind king**.

Their two eldest sons were **Duryodh(a)na** and **Dushassan(a)**.

The sons of Dhritharashtra became known as the **Kaur(a)vas**.

Gandhari's brother, **Shakuni**, king of Gandhar, moved into the royal household to protect his sister.

Pandu married **Kunti**. Unable to father children because of a curse, he allowed Kunti to invoke a mantra which a sage had given her as a youth. After her marriage with Pandu she had three sons:

Yudhisht(h)ir(a), also called **Dharm(a)putra**, with God Dharma

Bhim(a) with Wind God Vayu

Arjun(a) with the God of Gods Indra

Kunti had an earlier son, **Karna**, with the Sun God. But, until the end of the war no one knew who he was.

Pandu had a second wife, **Madri**. She also invoked the mantra and was given twins with the Ashvins, celestial physicians. Her sons were **Nakul(a)** and **Sahadev(a)**.

The five sons attributed to Pandu became known as the **Pandavas**.

The royal household employed two sages as counselors and educators of the boys, **Dronacharya** (Drona) and **Kripacharya** (Kripa).

Aswatthama – The son of Drona, who late in the war took revenge for his father’s unwarrior-like death by murdering all the sons of Draupadi, thereby obliterating the young generation of Pandavas. Aswatthama was also the name of an elephant, which allowed Yudhishtira to commit a white lie.

Krishna – A reincarnation of the god Vishnu, who comes to earth whenever the forces of good and evil have reached a severe misalignment. In his human guise Krishna has to go through birth, childhood, adulthood and death like a human being. He is exposed to joys and sorrows like other humans. Only in the discourse we know as Bhagavad Gita does he show his real power and message to the world. Krishna’s sister Subhadra was one of Arjuna’s wives. Their son was **Abhimanyu**.

Darshan – Vision. The rare occasion when Krishna lets himself be seen in his godly form and power.

Draupadi was the daughter of king Draupad. She was won into marriage through a warrior tournament by Arjuna. But, because of a vow to share everything equally when the Pandavas were living in the forest to escape the wrath of their cousin, she was married to all five Pandavas simultaneously. They shared her in yearly turns.

Bhagavad Gita (or Geeta) – The discourse between Krishna and Arjuna before the actual war begins. Arjuna is full of doubt about killing his own kinsmen. Krishna puts the war in perspective, as it is an inner struggle of overcoming evil and doing one’s duty to reestablish the good and the truth. He makes it clear to Arjuna, that only

the bodies of the warring parties will be killed. Their essence (Atman) is immortal and will remain. Therefore, Arjuna is convinced of the validity of this war.

VYASA AND GANPATI

Sage of sages, he devised a way
to tell ignorant humans about dharma,
weaving a splendid story full of byways,
intricate detail, of human folly, greatness,
thorny paths, of boons and curses.

To bring it into written form he lacked
a scribe. One god refused, but offered
Ganpati, who gained a second life
when through his father's anger he
had lost his head, then was revived,
though with an elephant head.
He did agree, but Vyasa shouldn't stop his tale.
The sage requested Ganpati that he not write
unless he understood. So Vyasa thought out
complex passages that gave him time
to rest and think while Ganpati digested
thoughts, then wrote without a pause.

We see Ganpati's images with
one tusk broken off. Some say
it was his writing instrument.

OATHS

The Mahabharat writhes with
the aftermath of many holy oaths
and potent curses. Though rooted
in a deep abiding faith in God
they seem to us spewed out in haste
without forethought for future incidents.
The tension between fate in action
and the actors' personal responsibility
is central to this tangled epic story.

Today we utter curses, swear a storm
without the ancients' fear of repercussions.
They harnessed discipline and purified
their lives to gain celestial boons.
We do not cleanse ourselves, and
gods don't grace us with their
potency of favors or of curses.

BHISHMA

Grandsire of the Bharatas, he
never fathered children of his own.
In sacrificing marriage and the throne
he set a moral compass for himself.
Though not retired from the world,
he was a sage, yet in his early youth
his mother had him trained
in statecraft, Vedas, archery,
prepared him to become the king
foreshadowed in his birth.

His life had stemmed from human failings,
when as the eighth child he was spared
the fate of earlier arrivals,
whom after birth his mother gave
as offerings to River Ganga.
King Santanu, infatuated with
a siren he had met at river's edge,
had married her and pledged not to
inquire who she was or what she did.

But after seven children, all
potential heirs, the desperate king
forced her to save this child.
She then revealed that she herself
was River Ganga, who promised
some immortals gone astray to free them
from their curse by birthing them.

She had to leave the court, but took the boy
and had him trained by sages and the gods,
in keeping with his role as royal heir.
When Devavrata returned to take
his princely place his knowledge glowed.

One day his father, abstinent since Ganga left,
chanced on new love, young Satyavati,
daughter of a river ferryman.
But knowing the demands her father made,
that Satyavati's son must win the throne,
Santanu wept, for Ganga's son was heir.

On seeing his own father in despair,
Devavrat inquired of his ills. When told,
he fetched the girl to see him wed.
As for himself, he made a vow
that he'd forgo the throne and stay
unmarried, celibate, so that no children could
conflict with plans the ferryman
envisioned for his own grandsons.

On this the heavens opened,
flowers rained on him,
the gods extolling Devavrata as
Bhishma, Bhishma, Bhishma:
a man who took a cruel vow
and kept it to the end.

SATYAVATI AND SANTANU

Satyavati bore to Santanu a son, who
in due course became the king. When
brother Bhishma won for him
three royal sisters as his wives
– the prize for matching warrior skills
with princes far and wide –
first sister Amba ran away in hopes
to win her secret love, which failed.

The young king's fate was battle, where
he fell before he had an heir. At this
succession crisis Satyavati wept
and pressed her oldest son, born from
another liaison, to lie with the two widowed queens.
But he lived in the forest as a sage.
His matted beard and hair appalled
the sisters, frightened them.

The first had closed her eyes while with the sage
and bore a blind male child. The other one
turned pale and in her fear conceived
a sallow, cursed son. The only one
who joyfully accepted what was asked of her
was one queen's maid, who bore a son
both wise and strong, yet not legitimate.

VIDUR

The healthy son of sage and royal maid
was educated with his princely brothers.
He reveled in the moral teachings,
and statecraft more than weaponry.
His wisdom helped him guide the land
to good relations, wealth, and be
Hastinapur's prime minister.

Though once the blind king's sons
were grown, his counsel was
no longer heard or valued.
The entourage of uncle, friend
and multitude of brothers
to prince Duryodhna was a flood
that swept all moral thought.

To keep the peace Vidur advised
the split of his beloved kingdom
in equal halves, but wickedness prevailed:
the Pandavas received much scrappy land.
Yet they were skilled and built their
town of Indraprasht into a glorious place.

Toward the end, when war was imminent,
Vidur resigned and did not fight the war.
He served the widowed Kunti at his residence.

THE POWER OF DIVINE GIFTS

In ancient days the gods gave gifts
to those who pleased them with
good deeds or through a life of
penance and purification.

So many sages lived austere beyond
our comprehension, gained clarity
through fasting, yoga, meditation,
that as rewards the gods blessed them
with boons and curses to dispense.
At times the sages used these gifts
in what appears to us as grudges,
unholy fits of anger, forcing on
their opponents dreadful calamities.

Misfortune fell on one who hunted deer
quite unaware that he had hit upon a sage
in just this shape, and on his wife.
The sage spewed out a fateful curse.
Another man received a holy weapon
to use just once in dire need.
And one who had deceived a sage
about his warrior origin to gain
a holy weapon and its use,
received it with a curse that it
would fail at a most crucial time.

KUNTI

Adopted as a child into her childless
uncle's house, she was a princess full of
youthful charm, but won a boon from one
who could foresee the dire fate entailed
in future married life. Whichever god
she called upon to copulate would
instantly give her a godly son,
ennobled with his father's traits.

In youthful doubt Kunti evoked the Sun,
who promptly manifested as man
in vivid light. Unmarried youth, she claimed
virginity and shame, yet Sun could not refuse
the benefit bestowed on her, but vowed
that after bearing him a son her youthful
maidenhood would be restored. So she
succumbed and bore right there a gorgeous child
adorned with golden earrings, armor, shield.

She dared not take him home, but made a casket,
tightly sealed, and floated it on River Ganga.
The current dropped it on the other bank,
where it was spotted by a charioteer,
who took it to his hut to please his wife.
The childless couple raised the boy with love,
and marveled at his innate skills.

PANDU

Born of a sage and widowed queen,
he grew – though younger than his
blind-born brother – to be the king.

Well trained and handsome, he exchanged
the wedding garland with the princess Kunti,
whom he accepted as his queen together with
a second wife, assuring progeny.
But as he hunted in the forest, he shot
a deer who was a sage in animal disguise,
cavorting with his wife. The sage
expelled a horrid curse of death,
denying Pandu all enjoyment of his queens.
Distraught, the king receded into forest life
away from courtly duties and distractions.
Hastinapur was run by uncle Bhishma and
Vidur, wise son of one queen's maid.

Queen Kunti then recalled her mantra.
She had three sons by different gods,
and Madri asked for two. Five Pandavas
were born. But one spring Pandu was
so overcome with lust for Madri,
that he could not control himself.
The curse came true. Contrite, she ended
her own life on Pandu's funeral pyre.

Kunti and the teenage sons sought shelter
at Hastinapur, their royal home, where
by default the blind one was made king.

THE PANDAVAS

Queen Kunti had evoked
the finest of the gods to give her sons.
With Dharma she had son Yudhishtir,
a balanced youth, both calm and just,
exemplifying righteousness.
But with his godly traits came human failings.
His love for gambling proved disastrous.

With Vayu, god of wind, she had
strong Bhima, tall and full of pranks.
He was a master of the mace or club,
but like a storm he could erupt.

Indra, god of gods, gave Arjuna to her,
who mastered bow and arrow like no other.
His godly traits made him the warrior strategist,
though he was full of doubt to fight
his elders and his cousin peers,
but Krishna as his charioteer laid out for him
the contrast of the honest fight for truth
and war for gain and greed.

Divine physicians gave Queen Madri twins.
The handsome boys, Nakul and Sahadev,
brave swordsmen, had their fathers' skills
with horses, cows, and healing husbandry.
Exceedingly intelligent
they served their brothers well.

BLINDNESS

He was born blind.
As king he readily espoused
his blindness as a state of mind.
He could not lead,
yet through his eldest sons
he lived the warrior culture lost to him.

Consumed with envy of
their righteous fearless kin
– five brothers, orphaned early,
spending teenage years at court with them–
the sons misused their father's state
in shameless ways.

His wife, Gandhari, saw, but bound
her eyes out of obeisant love to share
her consort's lack of vision.
Adoringly she spoiled her sons,
absolved her firstborn's constant scheming.
Yet as the country's queen
she found delight within her heart
at nephews and the widowed Kunti,
her sister-queen and friend.

Duryodhna, oldest son, saw with both eyes,
but wore a blind across his heart and mind.
Hastinapur, well guided under Bhishma and Vidur,
was prosperous, respected in the land.
Duryodhna, sure he should be future king
instead of uncle Pandu's sons, the cousins
who had equal aspirations to the realm,

developed vicious schemes to rid himself of them:
a house of wax to burn them in their sleep,
division of the kingdom, envy at success,
a game of dice to exile them for thirteen years,
a bitter war, that cost them all.

The state's affairs were in the hands
of sages, counselors, who taught the princes
warrior code and statecraft, mastery
of sword and archery and mace.
Their teachings must not have entailed
civility with royal cousins, for they
pretended not to see all the duplicity
Duryodhna and his coterie of brothers,
friend and mother's brother exercised.
They all kept quiet when Yudhishtir
in the game of dice pledged all his brothers
and their common wife as chips to be cashed in.
The sages Dronacharya and Kripa seemed
blinded by a drink or muted by a spell.
Had they forgotten moral teachings,
succumbing to events that sages could prevent?
Bound by his oath and his beloved kingdom,
the venerable Bhishma's mind did not divorce
the kingdom from the king. He too closed eyes
to greed and scheming of the blind king's ways.

SHAKUNI

His kingdom was Gandhar, but sister
Gandhari, ensconced in royal blindness,
made him the guardian of her sons.

He knew that Dharmaputra, Pandu's oldest son,
would as adult ascend the throne, his
sister's sons demeaned as lackey princes.
He schemed and twisted every fact
into a braid of slights against Duryodhna,
filled the boy with spite, devised
the vilest means to stop the Pandavas,
eradicate them from this earth, the only way
to see his sister's son succeed.

He was behind the scheme to build
the lacquer palace, produced the loaded dice,
allowing him to win against Yudhishtir
twice. He schemed to send the brothers
into thirteen years of exile.
He poisoned all the Kaurvas' minds,
fought bravely to the end when war became
the final dissolution, but all his scheming
bought his kin no peace, no final kingdom.

DURYODHNA

The blind king's oldest son,
he mastered all the warrior skills,
preparing to be king himself.
Though he was talented and brave,
he saw his cousins' mastery and
was consumed with jealousy.

He could not measure up to Bhima's strength
and Bhima, full of mischief, taunted him,
until Duryodhna organized a swim and meal
to poison him. But Bhima, counterpoisoned
by the king of snakes, came to and was alive.
Duryodhna's anger took new flight.

He made the Pandavas attend
a major feast, providing them with
all the comforts of a palace.
But it was built of lacquer, straw and wax,
intended to obliterate them in their sleep.
Vidur, the trusted counselor, had hinted
to Yudhishtir that a tunnel there would be
propitious, sending a miner for the secret work.
When it was time, the palace cinderling,
the brothers with their mother could escape.
They lived as Brahmans in disguise,
waiting for better times.

On finding that these young men had survived,
Duryodhna's father had to give consent
to let them share in half the kingdom.
He couldn't stand the thought, and after

seeing what they did with the neglected land,
creating a fine town and wealth
Duryodhna's greed could not be quelled.
Together with Shakuni he devised a plan,
inviting Pandavas to play a game of dice.
Yudhishtir played it well, Duryodhna did not dare
to be his opponent. Shakuni had a pair of
doctored dice and played the game for him.
The Pandavas lost everything, possessions,
freedom, wife. But on his counselors' advice
the king restored all their possessions,
until his restless son demanded yet another game.
This time the loser was to live in exile thirteen years.
Again Yudhishtir lost against Shakuni's loaded dice.
The brothers and their wife went to the forest,
made do for thirteen years, the last of which
they had to be disguised. Close to the end
Duryodhna claimed they were identified
and asked for twelve more years of exile agony.
The brothers had enough. They rallied allies
and prepared the ultimate.

KARNA

Born of the Sun, but raised
in humbleness, his life was cursed
or so he thought. With artistry
in archery far greater than those of
a charioteer he went to court
to meet the best trained
warrior princes and compete.
He beat most with his mastery,
but being of a humbler family
they took him for a fraud.

Prince Duryodhna saw in him
a mirror of his own diminishment.
He made him equal and a king.
Karna felt so indebted to the prince
that his devotion never failed.
Yearning for this warming friendship
he added insult to his friend's deceptions
and machinations against princely kin,
who too had royal aspirations.

KRISHNA

His birth in prison seemed unfortunate.
His mother bore him as her eighth,
the chosen one to kill his uncle, the usurper king,
who thought he could escape his fate
by keeping sister Devaki and husband Vasudev
imprisoned to be sure their sons
would not escape. Each time a son was born
he killed the child. But this time,
ere the king arrived to smash his skull
against the prison wall as he had done before,
his father spirited the newborn son away.
A friend exchanged with him his own
one-day-old girl, the furious king
was duped but could not throw the child away.

Young Krishna grew up in a village
with the parents of the female child,
but from his birth God's grace was manifest.
A demoness, sent out to poison him
with her own milk, died giving him her breast.
His youthful pranks had signs of the divine,
he stole much fresh-churned butter for his friends,
but when the villagers complained about a poison
in the river, killing cows that went to drink,
he found a ploy to dive into the river,
confront the snake king, make him leave.

As child he played his bamboo flute so sweet
that all the cows would follow him,
while early manhood found all milkmaids
fall in love with the young man. But

Radha's heart found in his love a universal thread.
An invitation to a wrestling match
was Krishna's fated chance to kill the king.
He opened up the prison gates and freed
his grandfather, the dethroned king,
then met his captive parents, Devaki and Vasudev.

BORN OF WATER

Bhishma's fluid style of ruling
covered boulders of deception,
flowed around the schemers' eddies,
yet tore the edges of his soul
when mulling over mother's teachings,
his oath of loyalty to father's land.
At last the storm of war
threw flotsam and debris
into his waters, hurting those who
worshiped River Ganga as the goddess
he embodied with his life.

DRAUPADI

While they escaped the wax house fire
and were – disguised as Brahmans –
living in a forest potter's house,
the Pandavas heard of a royal tournament
designed to choose a husband for
the princess Draupadi. Bored with their
beggars' life they asked their mother
for permission to attend.

The feat entailed the stringing of an
iron bow, release from it five arrows at a
moving target. Most princes could not even
bend the bow or string it, except Karna,
whose string snapped at the end.
Then one youth dressed as Brahman
asked to try the feat. He bent the bow
as if it were a reed, then aimed the arrows
with such ease that he could lay the target at
Draupadi's feet. She draped the marriage
garland on his neck, but all the warriors
were outraged at this unsuited match.

The Pandavas went home and ere their mother asked
what they had won, she told them "share it equally."
Thus Draupadi was married to all five, each
taking turns to be her husband for a year.
Arjun, whose skill had bent the bow,
was her beloved. He'd laid the target at her feet.

Duryodhna's entourage, enraged that he had not succeeded in the feat, began to realize that this young Brahman was his nemesis alive, and that his father had to call the brothers back. To keep the peace, the kingdom was divided, the newly-weds reclaimed an ancient but neglected site, which they revived and glorified, thus raising once again Duryodhna's envy.

YUDHISHTIR/DHARMAPUTRA

The son of dharma's burden was
his righteousness. It was a gift,
but rage and boasting could not
cross his lips, though in his heart
he had to fight to stay the course.
He made a promise to himself
not to speak ill or scold or criticize.
As king of Indraprastha his gentle ways
brought many friends into his court,
who thought he should be emperor.

But in Hastinapur Duryodhana burned
with envy, anger at his righteous skill.
Uncle Shakuni rescued him, suggested
to invite Yudhishtir to a game of dice which he
as king could not decline. His opponent
was not Duryodhana, but Shakuni's loaded dice.
He lost it all, his treasury, his kingdom, brothers, self,
even their wife. Enslaved, their fate was in
the hands of Bhishma and Vidur,
who pleaded with the blind king for their lives.
The king revoked it all and they went home.

But on Duryodhana's and Shakuni's pleading
they were called back to play a second game
which, as he lost again, sent all of them to
exile thirteen years. They took the forest life in stride,
but in the last year had to be disguised, as on
detection they would have to serve another dozen years.

SHAME

The game of dice turned savage
loss by loss. Yudhishtir had to pledge
more precious goods, his treasury, his land,
then one by one his brothers and himself.
Though now a slave, Shakuni forced him
into pledging Draupadi, their common wife.
Before her morning bath and rituals, with flying hair,
she was dragged to the gaming hall,
insulted as a slut for living with five men,
and then disrobed in front of all,
by blind king's second son, Dushassan.

The five sat silently, as did the elders,
counselors, while Draupadi first questioned
one by one injustice done, as no one
who had lost himself could pledge a wife.
In dire helplessness she cried to God to
save her from all-out disgrace.
Dushassan pulled her robes away, but she
was clothed with each new length until a mound
of garments piled the floor. Exhausted of
the intense work Dushassan had to stop.

The angry Draupadi then swore, that she would
never braid her hair until the day of her redress,
when she could bathe it in Durshassan's blood.
Her husbands were reminded every day
that she would not give up until revenge was had.

Though all the counselors implored the
blind king after this despicable event,
he could restore their freedom and their land,
but could not take away the shame, which lay
as heavy burden on the Kaurva dynasty.

EXILE

A second time the game was played.
The stakes this time a dozen years of exile
and the thirteenth living in disguise.
They played the game again with loaded dice
and with the same result.

The five and Draupadi, their wife,
donned simple garments and repaired
into the woods, joined forest sages,
learned from them more patience,
penance for their shortcomings.
Though many times one or the other
brother sought revenge and fight,
Yudhisthir held them back.
When he bemoaned their plight,
the sages told them tales of
ancient times, of people facing
misery for vows not kept.

Anticipating ultimately war,
they tried to gain more strength
from their celestial kin.
Arjun spent years in the Himalayas
to get a holy weapon from his father Indra,
Bhim met another son of wind god Vayu,
the monkey Hanuman, and gained
more strength from his embrace.
Yudhishtir passed a lengthy test
his brothers all had failed,
when in their dire thirst they did not
heed the eerie voice arising from a lake,

requesting that they answer questions
first, then slake their thirst.
Each one had died while drinking first.
Yudhishtir lastly went and answered
wisdom's questions one by one.
Despite his thirst he realized that Yama,
god of death and dharma, was testing him.
As boon for passing wisdom's trial
first one, then all his brothers were revived.

The thirteenth year disguise became
a greater challenge, for even in their forest garb
their regal manner, forceful eyes were hard to hide.
A friendly king accepted them: Draupadi as
a lady to the queen and Dharmaputra
courtier to the king. The mighty Bhima used
his cooking skills, Nakul and Sahadev were put
in charge of royal stables and the herds.
The most intriguing work fell to the clever Arjun.
While with his father he had learned to dance
and taught the daughter of the heavenly king.
She fell in love, but he, true to his vow,
did not give in. She poisoned him with impotence,
which Indra shortened to a year.
Arjuna used this curse to serve
as eunuch donning women's clothes,
and teach the princess dance.

THE FOREST

While holy men were forest dwellers,
the contrast between royal life
and forested simplicity was stark.

It was not trees, or berries that the royals learned,
though knowing nature helped them to survive.
Worldly distractions left behind, no flatterers,
no court petitioners, no friends,
they were alone with their own personalities.
Without the trappings of the court
who were they to and for each other?
What was their sense of Draupadi, their common wife?

Her shame and anger needed thirteen years to rearrange.
Not Draupadi, but womanhood had been disgraced.
A queen, she had to see herself as symbol of her gender.
Yudhishtir, failed as leader in his brothers' eyes,
and weak, had to regain his inner guide
and find what dharma truly meant to him.
Hot-headed Bhima's strength had to be tamed
by Hanuman, whose tail he could not even lift,
as he lay in Bhim's way. Thus humbled he was made
to recognize the godly strength of others.
As main protector of their common wife
he had to find his softer side, though wrath
for her revenge burned deep.
Dushassan's blood he tasted in his sleep.
Arjun, the god-like image of a warrior prince,
was wounded in his manhood, facing impotence,
and had to live a year in womanly disgrace.

In thirteen years each had to grapple with
their strongest traits and deepest weaknesses
of heart and mind. It gave their lives
the meaning they had sensed,
a wholeness and perfection of the heart,
prepared them to defend the dharma.

PEACE

Skilled scion of a warrior breed
Duryodhna's world was battlefields.
As oldest of the Kaurva race he saw
the future throne as his, though uncle
Pandu held the throne when they were born,
and Dharmaputra had the same prerogative.
The cousins, brave and skilled as he,
acquired learning and celestial traits
their fathers had conveyed.
Duryodhna, though a princely child,
acquired blindness from both sides.
Consumed with envy he engaged
an entourage of schemers dreaming
to secure his privilege.

When Arjun had won Draupadi,
Duryodhna's burning anger was not eased
to see the kingdom split in two.
Through trickery he wanted it all back
and used Shakuni as his tool
to let the cousins disappear.
But living in the forest taught
the brothers patience, braving
hardship and the finer points
of right and wrong.
The vow of thirteen years fulfilled
they sent their envoys to the court
to ask their share of kingdom back.

Duryodhna felt they lost it fair
and he had gained it square,
he would not part with anything,
not even villages, nor so much as a needle pin.

When even godly Krishna
could not broker peace,
a brutal war was imminent.

WAR

The war, depicted as
a fight between two armies,
of friends and relatives no less,
is Vyasa's way to make us see
complexities of inner battles.
Why do we fight, when do we fight,
when is appeasement of
a friend appropriate?

The instant pleasures of the senses
are foes against a deep experience of God.
They lead to pain and disappointment,
while moderation in all things
makes room for prayer, meditation,
thoughts of God, who dwells within,
but wants to be discovered
through experience,
divine direction, happiness.

The slaying of obnoxious habits,
of push and shove and me-first attitude
will open our eyes to see the world
with love and helpful hands,
it purifies our Selves.

KARNA'S DILEMMA

When war was imminent
queen Kunti's heart was rent.
Her Karna had to fight the Pandavas
and did not know that he was one himself.

Kunti went to his place of morning prayers
to beg a word, then told him who he was.
But he, until that moment shamed,
rebuked by her and all the brothers,
reminded Kunti that throughout his life
Duryodhna proved a worthy friend
whose salt he ate and trust he gained.
He could not now abandon him.

But he did promise mother Kunti,
that he would not destroy her sons but one.
No matter who survived the fight
between Arjuna and himself,
she still would have five sons.

KRISHNA'S DILEMMA

He was related to the Pandavas
and to the Kaurvas both.
Therefore, when war drew near,
both parties vied for his assistance.
But he refused to fight, though
offering his army to one faction
and to the other just himself.
Arjun, the younger, had first choice.
He wanted only Krishna's help.
Duryodhna, overjoyed,
received the strength of Krishna's army.

Duryodhna only saw the king
of Dwarka, while Arjun was aware
of Krishna's godly incarnation.
While gaining just a charioteer,
he counted Krishna's force
as wisdom, power, purity.
His guidance weighed more
than a thousand men.

SANJAY'S DIVINE VISION

Before the horrid war was to begin
the sage Vyasa visited the king.
He offered him the boon of divine vision.
The king preferred the blindness of his foundering.

To see the battlefield unfold, Vyasa then
gave Sanjay, charioteer and blind king's
personal valet, the precious gift.
Thus Sanjay could relay the daily battle
to the king, who felt the pain of losing
sons and kin, but could not see within his heart
that in his mental blindness lay the start.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The ancients tell us that in war
the code was strict. Though massive armies
were at stake, the warriors were matched
according to their rank and weapon skills
and fought each other individually.

A chariot archer fought another archer,
a swordsman on a horse engaged the same,
and experts with the mace would meet
on foot next to their chariots.

Foot soldiers fought opposing footmen,
as did the elephant brigades.

At sundown weapons were laid down
and opponents could visit for a chat.

Yudhishtir even walked across the battle line
before the conch was blown without his weapons,
armor, bowed to the ground before his teachers,
elders of the clan to get their benediction,
although within the hour they were the sharpest opponents.
But warrior code prescribed that such a fight
should have the elders', mentors' blessings.

Yet in the heat of battle and the changing
dominance each side forgot the code,
fought unarmed warriors, many against one,
used tricks and taunts to gain advantage,
a slaughter that went on for eighteen days.

KRISHNA'S DARSHAN

Krishna in his earthly life had to
experience human failings. But
to a select few he showed
a glimpse of his divinity.
His foster mother saw the universe,
when as a child he let her stare
into his opened mouth.

Krishna blessed his vicious uncle
on his deathbed with his sight,
despite the crime that he
had killed his seven brothers.

When Krishna hoped to broker peace,
he let the blind king see his glory.
For just a moment blindness fell
from him, but he found comfort
in his lifelong blinded state.

To Arjun Krishna was a friend, but he
transcended earthly bonds before the war
to teach the listless Arjun warrior duties
and realize God's glory in himself.
To seal this truth Arjun requested
Krishna's darshan. Krishna obliged.

BHISHMA'S END

As elder statesman of the Bharatas
he ruled the Kaurvas loyally,
though all five Pandavas lived in his heart.
Blessed with a boon to choose his time of death
he had outlived two generations.
A brilliant strategist and archer,
he led the Kaurvas into war.
His arrows rained down on his opponents.
though prince Duryodhna ceaselessly
implied a lack of loyalty. But Bhishma
fought to kill, with one demand,
to leave five Pandavas alive
and not to fight Shikandin.

She had been Amba in a previous life,
who swore an oath to be his death.
When she escaped the threesome marriage,
was slighted and denied her secret love,
she sought the forest, penance and austerities,
until a boon was given her to be reborn as man
and fight against the hated Bhishma.
When born as oldest child of Drupad, father of
queen Draupadi, Shikandin fought
along the Pandavas and on the tenth day
of the war engaged with Bhishma. He,
true to his oath, averted all his arrows from
Shikandin. But Arjun and Shikandin
covered Bishma's body with their arrows,
so that when the old man fell, his body
did not touch the ground,
but rested on a bed of arrows.

Suspended through the end of war,
lastly he blessed Yudhishtir as new king,
then let his body go.

THE END OF WAR

When Bhishma fell, the Kaurvas chose
old Drona as their general. But through a boon
he was invincible in battle. Only the white lie
that Aswatthama, his son, had died made Drona
lose all will to live and throw down weapons, armor.
Old animosities between king Drupad, Drona
had sparked an oath, which gave a son to Drupad.
But it was cursed, the son foredoomed
to be the cause of Drona's death.

Brave Karna had abstained from war
until the fallen Bhishma lay suspended.
His honor code demanded that
the Kaurva elder bless his entry into battle.
He went to Bhishma on his bed of arrows, was
blessed and recognized as son of Kunti, but
honor-bound to lifelong friend, Duryodhna.
For days Karna engaged the enemy with valor,
but lost the mantra to his finest weapon
in facing Arjuna. And when his chariot wheel
got stuck as sages had foreseen,
Arjun could finish him.

Duryodhna, long commanding from the rear,
came face to face with Bhima, who looked back
at all the shame inflicted on queen Draupadi.
While at the game of dice he'd sworn to break
Duryodhna's thighs. His moment came when
after an exhaustive fight he was reminded of his oath
and hit Duryodhna – contrary to warrior code –
below the navel with his mace. It was his final blow.

Aswatthama, inspired by an owl at night
that killed a row of sleeping crows,
went that same night into the camp of Pandavas
and killed Draupadi's sleeping sons,
a payback for his father's hideous death.
As last revenge he sent a blade of grass straight
into Uttara's – the wife of Abhimanyu – belly,
where one last Pandava was growing up.
But Krishna intervened to save the future
generation. Five brothers and queen Draupadi
survived, but found no pleasure in their victory.

RIGHT AND WRONG

Duryodhna in his greed and treachery
compounded by his father's blind
devotion to his son, was deaf to
all the counseling that Bhishma, Drona,
and Vidur throughout their lives and into war
were offering. He justified his deeds
as right course of the warrior breed.

During the war both sides committed shameful acts:
All veteran Kaurva warriors jointly fought
young Abhimanyu, Arjun's son
– who knew the code to break a tight formation,
but did not know the exit strategy
and was cut off from his support –
unto his death and danced around his corpse.

The Pandavas deceived old Drona, who loved
Aswatthama, his son, more than the world.
When Drona proved invincible they spread
a rumor, that his beloved son was dead,
though they had slain an elephant by that name.

It was a crime to overwhelm an unarmed foe,
yet was committed by both sides.
Krishna's duplicitous encouragement
of friends to use an opponent's debility
is hard to understand. But he was born
to fight for truth, to rebalance the world.

MOTHERS

Confusion reigns about the role of mothers.
Devaki and Ganga each bore seven sons
they had to offer back to Death. Both had
an eighth son who survived to play
a major role in the unfolding drama.

Then we find Kunti, who in youthful doubt
tried out a boon, but did not want the child.
Abandoned, he grew up with foster parents,
and later joined the forces of the dark.
She loved her other sons with motherly resolve,
and even raised the twins as hers, whose mother
killed herself for tempting Pandu as forbidden fruit.

We see Gandhari love her hundred sons,
though in her self-appointed lack of vision
she overlooked the menace of her oldest prince.
At times she intervened to stop his madness,
but in a house of blindness she could not succeed.

Draupadi too had sons with her five husbands,
but exiled, had to leave young lives behind.
Thirteen years later she met youthful warriors,
trained as their fathers, brave in fight.
The treachery of war caught them asleep
within their tent. Cold-blooded murder
aimed at rooting out Pandava seeds.

Arjuna's other wife was Krishna's sister.
They had a son, raised in his uncle's house.
Though brave, young Abhimanyu's skills

lacked one strategic bit of information.
He fought alone against the Kaurvas army
courageously, paid with his life too young.

The warrior mothers knew that sacrifice
was theirs to bear, when sons were raised
as offerings to war, yet we cannot forget
the ache of loss in any mother's heart.

TRUTH

What is this truth that forced
the Pandavas into a deadly war?
The truth of honesty and fairness,
the love of god, respect for others,
duty without expectation of reward.

Arjuna's restless hesitation before the war
was quelled by Krishna, who transformed
from childhood friend to God of all creation.
The discourse he engaged him in
has riveted the world. We call it Bhagavad Gita.

God is in all of us, but waking up
to be tuned in to Him requires that
we turn around and face in his direction,
accept, that everything is Him,
get rid of our arrogance of freedom.
Illusion is conviction that
there is no God, we are our path,
while clearly God tells us, that
all is one, there is no separation.



CHRISTA PANDEY IS AN AUSTIN POET, WHO MIGRATED HERE AFTER A LONG LIFE IN VARIOUS PARTS OF THE U.S. AND MEXICO. BROUGHT UP AS A CHRISTIAN IN GERMANY, SHE MARRIED A HINDU FROM INDIA AND BEGAN HER SPIRITUAL JOURNEY ACROSS CULTURES AND RELIGIONS. EVENTUALLY, SHE STUDIED THE BIBLE, THE BHAGAVAD GITA, BUDDHIST SCRIPTURES AS WELL AS THE KORAN.

A NATURE LOVER, SHE BEGAN HER POETIC JOURNEY WITH 'SOUTHERN SEASONS,' A CHAPBOOK PUBLISHED BY FINISHING LINE PRESS. A QUESTIONING OF THE MEANING OF LOVE LED TO A SERIES OF ARGUMENTS WITH THE APOSTLE PAUL OVER HIS PRONOUNCEMENTS ON LOVE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13. THE RESULTING CHAPBOOK, 'SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS,' IS AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR.

'MAYA' IS AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CHARACTERS OF THE MAHABHARATA, WHICH MAY BE HELPFUL TO THOSE WHO HAVE READ THE BHAGAVAD GITA, BUT ARE NOT FAMILIAR WITH THE BACKSTORY. A COMPANION VOLUME, 'HUMMINGBIRD WINGS,' IS AN ATTEMPT TO WRITE KARMA MEDITATIONS, DISTILLED FROM THE BHAGAVAD GITA AND BUDDHIST READINGS.

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